

# LONG ISLAND BOTANICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Vol. 7, No. 2

Mar. - Apr. 1997

## Insects of *Phragmites australis*

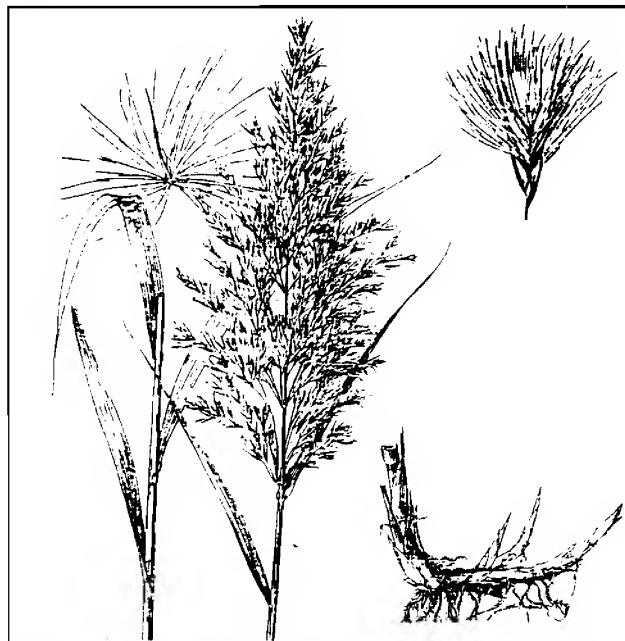
*"I wish there were more places with lots of phragmites and purple loosestrife!"*

A botanist's complaint? Hardly. The gripe is that of a "butterflier" (a new term, analogous to birder) during a local Fourth of July Butterfly Count. The broad-winged skipper (*Poanes viator zizaniae*) is a good addition to the day's list, and any place where the larval food plant, phragmites, and the adult's favorite nectar source, purple loosestrife occur together is sure to harbor the skipper.

Strangely though, this is one of the few insects that feeds on *Phragmites australis*, the common reed, in North America. Aside from the unrelated Yuma skipper (*Ochlodes yuma*) of the western United States (Scott et al., 1977), there seems to be little in the literature identifying close insect associates of phragmites (Hudsonia, 1994). The weevil *Sphenophorus aequalis* feeds on the roots of this plant, among other grasses including corn (Blatchley & Leng, 1916), and the aphid *Hyalopterus arundinis* apparently feeds on phragmites juices (Leonard, 1926). It is likely that a few additional insects whose names suggest an association, e.g. the noctuid moth *Leucania phragmitidicola* (Forbes, 1954;

Covell, 1984) and the scale insect *Chaetococcus phragmitidis* (Kiviat et al. 1996), include phragmites in their diet. Overall, however, considering the abundance of this potential host to herbivores, insects specializing on it in North America are few.

In Eurasia, where *Phragmites australis* also occurs, the picture seems to be very different, and the literature on the subject provides much more informative reading (ha!). I found information on the following insects feeding on phragmites: several noctuid moths in three genera; four species of leafhoppers; flies of three families—Chloropidae (grass flies), Cecidomyiidae (gall midges), and Agromyzidae (leaf miner flies)—each with several species in more than one genus; an aphid; a scale insect; and two donaciine leaf beetles (Skuhravy, 1978; Parry, 1980; Toorn & Mook, 1982; Schiers & De Bruyn, 1992; Mikkola & Lafontaine, 1994; Gillham & De Vrijer, 1995; Myartseva et al., 1995).



*Phragmites australis*, from Hitchcock (1951).

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Exploiting this rich herbivore fauna are large numbers of specialized parasitic wasps that feed on phragmites' moths, grass flies, gall midges, scale insects and aphids (Basky, 1982; Kamijo, 1983; De Bruyn, 1987; Tscharntke *et al.*, 1991; Tscharntke, 1992; Rohfritsch, 1992; Myartseva *et al.*, 1995).

Skuhravy (1978) estimated that one third of the stems of phragmites in fresh-water marshes in Czechoslovakia suffer damage from insects, and that as a result, as much as 20% of the annual net production of the plant is lost. If the apparent difference in phragmites insect diversity in Eurasia *vs.* North America is real, it may explain why the plant is more weedy and aggressive in North America. There are far fewer herbivores to keep it in check. The diversity difference also lends support to the contention that phragmites is a relatively recent introduction in the United States. A short history of residence in our hemisphere would explain why comparatively few insect species have adapted to this all-too-abundant resource.

A logical extension of these ideas is the possibility of biological control through imported insect herbivores—although the history of ecological tragedy resulting from the introduction of alien species ought to act as a sobering restraint. This may be academic, however. The experiment has already begun, even here on Long Island. Mikkola and Lafontaine (1994) report as new to North America the Palaearctic noctuid moth *Apamea unanimis*, taken in 1991 near Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. They also note two additional recent introductions, *Apamea ophiogramma* and *Rhizedra lutosa*, both also Palaearctic noctuids. All three feed on phragmites and *Phalaris* (reed canary grass), and for that reason are thought to have been from some common, though unknown, source.

This past season I trapped a specimen of *R. lutosa* at Montauk County Park, for what is probably the first Long Island record of this moth. Phragmites must be shaking in its roots.

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Skip Blanchard, L.I.U./C.W. Post Campus

# Early Collections of Phragmites from Long Island, New York

Can botanists and plant ecologists determine what the vegetation of Long Island was like 100 to 200 years ago? Can they accurately deduce which plant species were native to the island, and which have been introduced after European contact? The answers to these questions often lie in two sources: written documents and historical plant collections deposited in herbaria (plant museums).

Is the common reed, *Phragmites australis*, indigenous (native) to Long Island, or is it an alien (non-native, introduced) species? Evidence from historical plant collections and scientific literature suggests that a native, non-aggressive, non-invasive “race” of phragmites probably occurred on Long Island for at least the past 3000 years (see Niering and Warren, 1977); however, soon after the early 1900’s a more competitive and invasive “race” of phragmites appears to have been introduced to the metropolitan New York City area from Europe or elsewhere. In the absence of natural checks and balances (see Blanchard, 1997) the introduced race rapidly exploited habitat and resources previously utilized by native species such as cat-tail (*Typha* spp.); the result was a rapid population explosion of phragmites. It is remarkable to note that the common reed did not occur in South Carolina as recently as the early 1960’s (Radford et al., 1964); the first report of phragmites from that state was in 1975 (see Stalter, 1975). It is now common throughout the southeastern States.

So, what can we learn from the early collections of phragmites from Long Island? To answer this question, I visited the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and the New York State Museum in Albany, and studied their Long Island collections of phragmites. Additionally, I surveyed botanical literature from the early 1900’s to determine whether written records confirm the account portrayed by historical plant collections. I report my findings both generally (see Figures 1 and 2) and specifically by referring to two Long Island locations that have been floristically studied in detail during the past century: Cold Spring Harbor and Orient Point.

In 1915 Duncan Johnson and Harlan York published the results of an intensive study of the vegetation at the Cold Spring Harbor salt marsh,

located on Long Island’s north shore straddling the border between Nassau and Suffolk counties. Johnson and York described a pristine salt marsh dominated by all the typical salt marsh grasses and associated herbs. They also studied the vegetation occurring where fresh water flowed into the salt marsh, and reported extensive stands of narrow-leaf cat-tail (*Typha angustifolia*) accompanied by swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata* var. *pulchra*), rose-mallow (*Hibiscus moscheutos*), blue flag (*Iris versicolor*), rice cutgrass (*Leersia oryzoides*), and poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*). A population of *Lilaeopsis chinensis*, a bizarre member of the Carrot Family with no common name, was also noted. Altogether, 152 species of vascular plants were reported from the salt marsh and its adjacent borders. **Conspicuously missing from the publication is any mention of *Phragmites australis* occurring at or near the Cold Spring Harbor salt marsh.**

Nine years later, Henry Conard (1924) published a second survey of the vegetation of the Cold Spring Harbor salt marsh, and once again *Phragmites australis* was not reported from the site.

The reports from these two publications are substantiated by historical plant collections deposited at the above mentioned herbaria. *Phragmites australis* was first collected from Cold Spring Harbor by Stanley A. Cain in 1935 [Cold Spring Harbor, Inner Harbor, salt marsh, 21 Aug 1935, Cain 488 (NY)]. Cain also collected phragmites from nearby Bayville in 1934, and in 1938 W. C. Muenscher collected it from Huntington Harbor.

Based upon historical collections and scientific

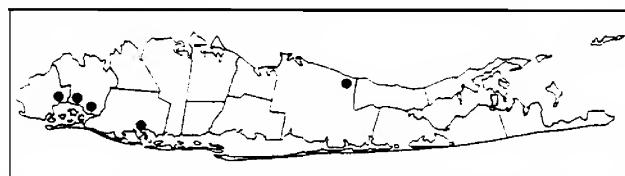


Figure 1. Long Island collections of *Phragmites australis* (pre-1900).

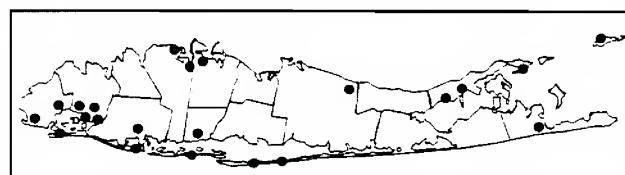


Figure 2. Long Island collections of *Phragmites australis* (1900-1940).

publications. *Phragmites australis* first colonized the Cold Spring Harbor salt marsh during the late 1920's or early 1930's. Today, a monoclonal stand of common reed occupies the harbor's high salt marsh.

A similar series of events occurred on eastern Long Island. Roy Latham first collected phragmites on the North Fork in 1914 [Swamp at Orient. Rare (Two stations at Orient: Heath Swamp and F. L. Young's Ditch.), 1 Aug 1914, *Latham* 3607 (NYS)]. The first collection from the South Fork was also by Latham [Brackish marsh, Amagansett, 25 Aug 1929, *Latham* 6696 (NYS)]. In 1957, Latham published a detailed account of the initial colonization and subsequent migration of phragmites on eastern Long Island (the article is reprinted on page 11 of this issue of the Newsletter). The first small colony was observed at Orient in 1900, the second colony "of only a few plants" appeared at Cutchogue in 1918; by 1920 the species appeared at several locations on the South Fork.

The earliest Long Island collection of phragmites is from 1864 [Jamaica, 17 Sep 1864, *William H. Leggett s.n.* (NY)]; the earliest collection from Suffolk County is from 1872 [Wading River, 24 Aug 1872, *Elihu S. Miller s.n.* (BKL)]. It is possible that these specimens were collected from native Long Island populations. It would be interesting to compare the DNA of Long Island individuals of phragmites with Eurasian individuals, and attempt to determine the source of our present day populations of the common reed.

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**Eric Lamont**, Riverhead

## Distribution of Common Reed

*Phragmites*, a genus of three species, is nearly worldwide in distribution. *Phragmites karka* and *P. mauritianus* are found in the Old World, while *P. australis* (long known as *P. communis*; see Clayton 1967), common reed, is found in both the Old World and the New. In fact, it may well have the greatest range of any vascular plant.

*Phragmites* has been called an exotic in North America, but it was present in the American Southwest at least 1000 years before European contact. In archeological studies, phragmites parts were found in ruins in southwestern Colorado dated A.D. 600-800 (Kane & Gross, 1986). Similarly, its pre-Columbian occurrence in southern New England is confirmed from tidal marsh deposits dated ca. 1000 B.C. (Niering & Warren, 1977). However, it has not always been as plentiful in the Northeast as it is now. John Torrey, for example, in 1843 described it as "occasional" in New York State. In the 1986 checklist of the New York State Flora, Richard Mitchell indicated that it might be in part naturalized in New York. This intriguing suggestion may well be correct, but it is untested.

*Phragmites australis* is morphologically, chemically, and cytologically diverse in Europe and western Asia. The rapid spread of phragmites in the Northeast in the last few decades might be accounted for by the introduction of a more aggressive biotype from Europe or elsewhere earlier in this century. Such a scenario is not without parallel. Reed canary-grass, *Phalaris arundinaceae*, includes both native and introduced strains in North America; the introduced one is apparently the weedy problematical one (Dore & McNeill, 1980).

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**Gordon Tucker**, Eastern Illinois University

(Formerly of the N. Y. State Museum)

# Phragmites

by Roy Latham

(This article first appeared in 1957,  
published in "The Long Island Naturalist,"  
a publication of the Baldwin Bird Club.)

The rapid increase of *Phragmites* on Long Island is noteworthy when we trace its growth over more than half a century. The writer started taking observations and records of the local flora before 1900 and had a knowledge of this reedgrass on both forks of the Island by 1910. In 1900 there was a single small stand of this grass in Orient. This constituted the only station on the north branch. The second colony of only a few plants appeared in Cutchogue in 1918. By 1920 the species appeared in a number of places on the south fork, in new localities on the north fork, and farther westward. Its spread then became more and more rapid until now it is quite general on the Island.

Peter Henderson in his handbook of plants, 1890, states that the *Phragmites* is common on the south side of Long Island. This statement probably applied to the western sections of the Island. It did not agree with the records on the eastern end 20 years later.

The manuals all speak of *Phragmites* rarely maturing seed. However, fertile seed cannot be as scarce as supposed, for the plant could become established in a number of the isolated colonies only by seed. The writer knows of one large colony which originated in a handful of panicles tossed from a passing car into a moist meadow.

This grass is naturally a species of moist and wet soils and often grows in water several feet in depth. It is impartial to fresh or salt water situations. On Long Island it is most abundant in brackish situations, heads of drains, along ditches, wet borders of salt marshes and back of sea beaches, where the long rhizomes can be seen in places where the wash of the tides has exposed the root system. These rhizomes, often 50 feet or more in length, are just below the surface, where they choke and crowd out more beneficial species. The plant has invaded and completely exterminated the native cattails in various swamps and bogs. In recent years the reed

has become established in a number of low but normally dry locations far from water or moist soil.

The *Phragmites* is a beautiful grass greatly admired by people who enjoy the landscape. Most naturalists have a dislike for it. Some detest it as an intruder. The botanist finds little worth searching for within its limits. The collecting entomologist finds it unproductive, difficult to get through or work in. The birdman fares somewhat better, for the thick stands of this reed form shelters for winter sparrows, wrens and rails. The original bed in Orient was the winter site for swamp sparrows for years when they could be found in no other location here.

*Phragmites communis* (the form on Long Island is referred to as the variety *Berlandieri*) now ranges over most of North America, south into Mexico and South America. Only three species in the genus *Phragmites* are known throughout the world. As native or introduced plants, their range includes Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia, as well as the Americas.



"The Reed and other water plants;" illustration by David Kandel (from *De Stirpium* of Jerome Bock, 1552).

# Phragmites on the South Fork of Long Island

There is a new kid on the block and its name is P-H-R-A-G-M-I-T-E-S. Well, perhaps, not so new. It has become the topic of dinner conversations - if not dinner conversations, well, lunch conversations - from Georgica Pond to Jamaica Bay.

It has a lot of common names - plume grass, giant reed, ditch reed, and common reed - but "reed" is such a vague word, descriptively, that the scientific name is most often used. When one mentions phragmites, just about one out of two South Fork residents understands. That's how distinctive it is and how prevalent it's become.

By this time you may have guessed that we are talking about the largest grass in town, outside of bamboo. There's another one of these humongous reed grasses, *Arundo donax*, also called giant reed, which is even taller (to 18 feet high), but you rarely see it here; its New World distribution is more southern.

A vigorous monoclonal stand of phragmites will top out at 12 feet: David Robinson and Hakim Olaijuwon would be lost from view in it.

Cat-tails aren't nearly as tall as phragmites. And they don't count! They're not grasses.

There are very, very few native plant species that link different peoples around the globe. Talk about a white pine to a Russian and he doesn't know what you mean. He may light up when you point out a larch; that's one that grows throughout the Northern Hemisphere.

Phragmites, as the osprey in the animal world, just may be the only one that can call every one of the continents, save the Antarctic, its home, it is that ubiquitous. And it's been around a long time. It was one of the first species described by Carolus Linnaeus, the father of the science of taxonomy and systematics, in 1753.

When I was in Papua, New Guinea, in August of 1987, I couldn't help notice a large clump of reeds alongside one of the outback dirt tracks in the highlands. When I got up close I could see that it was, yes, phragmites. It looked just like the stuff I'd been looking at on the edges of Hook Pond just a few weeks earlier.

E. E. Henty, author of "A Manual of the Grasses of New Guinea," writes about it thusly: "It is found throughout New Guinea, from near sea level to at least 6,000 feet, along streams, and in wet grassland and shallow swamps. It occupies large areas ... in almost pure stands."

In other words, it grows there as here.

A. E. Roland and E. C. Smith in "The Flora of Nova Scotia" state that phragmites is "found along the upper borders of salt marshes, or just behind them in wet, partly

brackish situations or in boggy areas along ditches or in boggy situations. One station inland is found in a swampy spot marked on the geologic map as a salt spring.

In "The Flora of Arizona," Thomas Kearney and Robert Peoples list it as occurring in "marshes and [on] wet ground along irrigation canals and river banks."

In "The Outerlands," a recent book about the natural history of the region from Cape Cod to Long Island, Dorothy Sterling writes that "[phragmites occurs] in many places, particularly where natural ground cover has been disturbed by fill or dredging [and the natural] succession has been interrupted by an invasion of ... this vigorous reed with horizontal rootstocks that can grow 50 feet in a season, sending up stout stems all along its length. It flourishes in salt or fresh water and on dry, gravelly wastelands, it contributes little food or shelter to wildlife."

From these passages, it is evident that we are dealing with one of the most successful and one of the most opportunistic plants ever evolved. Given a little water, it grows practically anywhere, particularly along coasts, and most vigorously where the land has been disturbed.

From one small phragmites root a forest can ensue, each tree an exact duplicate in appearance and genetics of every other one.

The attractive heads of this grass are just that, attractive. They do not have to develop seed to reproduce the species. It may be that the only limits to the spread of phragmites are hard freezes, deep shade, and aridity.

Just how it got to Long Island is not clear. In the classic two-volume "Manual of the Grasses of the United States" by Hitchcock and Chase, it is shown that phragmites occurs throughout the United States, save for the Southeastern coastal states (it may be there now).

There is a gap between New Jersey and Florida. The fact that phragmites is well established along the shores of New England and the Canadian Maritime Provinces, and in parts of the British Isles, suggests that our phragmites may have come from the north, not the south, or it may have come from the west. It could have floated in, blown in, or been carried in by birds.

Because of its aggressive nature, not to mention that it fouls landscaped plots and blocks views, phragmites is getting a bad rep. Not so much in Europe, however, where it is used to stabilize dikes, treat sewage at campgrounds, absorb toxics and nutrients from seeps and spills, and perform other acts of public service.

It is also used as thatch in different parts of the world - where they still have thatchers - and for making tatami floor mats in Japan. We're told that the quality of the phragmites used for these purposes has been deteriorating of late, maybe due in part to pollution.

One eastern Long Island we don't thatch, we don't have large dykes against the sea, we don't use grasses and rushes to treat sewage. Phragmites has very little good to do, and much harm.

Locally, there is some idea of the rapidity of its spread. When I was a boy on the North Fork, as early as the mid-1940s I remember walking through stands of phragmites, but only in a few small areas, at the ends of tidal creeks, both on the Sound and bay sides of the peninsula.

Walter Helmuth, the son of the venerable Long Island naturalist William Helmuth, summered around Georgica Pond in the '30s and doesn't remember phragmites as the dominant feature of the landscape it has become. Donald Petrie, who lives on Georgica Pond and has studied it closely for several years, has a black-and-white photograph of the pond taken from the air in 1938. A few small patches of phragmites seem to be discernible.

Many local observers equate the 1938 Hurricane with the appearance of phragmites. It must have played a part.

It is also well documented that phragmites invades spoil sites after dredging operations.

A just-completed survey by the Town Natural Resources Department of phragmites stands throughout the Town of East Hampton indicates that other factors are helping phragmites take over shore areas as well. In every saltmarsh system criss-crossed with mosquito ditches, phragmites was thriving. In such situations the phragmites is advancing toward the tidal water along many of the ditches that run landward from it.

In a few of these saltmarsh systems, such as Little Northwest Creek, phragmites has completely circled the marsh at the tree line and is working its way over the marsh toward the water at the rate of several feet a year.

On the north side of town, the harbor and tidal creeks most under the sway of this species are Little Northwest Creek, Northwest Creek, Barnes Meadow (northeast of Northwest Creek), Ely Brook Pond, Accabonac Harbor, and Fresh Pond in Amagansett. At the rate the phragmites is closing in on the water at Fresh Pond, there will be no more saltmarsh left in 10 years.

Phragmites is also rampant around Georgica Pond and Hook Pond. Lake Montauk has the least amount, according to the studies, and Napeague Harbor is also relatively phragmites-free.

Three Mile Harbor is intermediate, between those about to be taken over and those safe for the time being. Its southern end, Soak Hides Cove, is thoroughly infiltrated.

Betsy Jacobs, who participated in the phragmites survey, grew up at the edge of Soak Hides and remembers standing on Soak Hides Road and looking out at Three Mile Harbor more than a decade ago and getting a clear

view of the water. Not so in August 1995 - she could hardly see a trace of it.

Beware, phragmites is on the march. Bolt your door, keep the pets inside. This thing is out to get us, and it seems to be right on target. When I was standing in a large patch of it, hemmed in on all sides at Northwest Creek on Sunday, I thought I could hear it murmuring.

Were the stalks communicating, or was it just a breeze trying to rustle through? The sun plays funny tricks on the mind.

**Larry Penny, East Hampton**

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## **Society News**

### *January Meeting*

Members Night: **Celia & Julius Hastings** showed slides of orchids (and one lily) from Newfoundland, North Carolina and California. **Steve Clements** showed slides of orchids taken in the 1950's at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, followed by current slides of a large variety of cycads.

### *Nominating Committee Reactivated*

Current terms for LIBS officers expire in 1997, and nominations are being accepted for a new slate of officers to serve for 1998-1999. Elections will take place at the November, 1997, monthly meeting. **Prof. Vincent Puglisi** is chairman of the Nominating Committee; **Betty Lotowycz** and **Eric Lamont** are also members. Please contact Vince at 516-572-7575 if you would like to become more involved in LIBS by serving as an officer. Also, anyone interested in editing the newsletter should contact Eric at 516-722-5542.

### *LIBS Assists The Nature Conservancy*

LIBS has been asked to assist TNC with a floristic inventory of Cordwood Landing County Park on the north shore in Miller Place. The membership is invited to join the Flora Committee on field trips to the site during the spring and fall. **Allan Lindberg** of LIBS will be coordinating the survey with **Randall Tate**, TNC's Director of Stewardship & Fire Management. Additional details will follow in the next issue of the newsletter.

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## LONG ISLAND BOTANICAL SOCIETY

Founded: 1986; Incorporated: 1989.

The Long Island Botanical Society is dedicated to the promotion of field botany and a greater understanding of the plants that grow wild on Long Island, New York.

President	Eric Lamont
Vice President	Skip Blanchard
Treasurer	Carol Johnston
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Cor'sp Sec'y	Jane Blanchard
Local Flora	Steven Clemants
Field Trip	Glenn Richard
Membership	Allan Lindberg
Conservation	Lois Lindberg
Education	John Turner
Hospitality	Louise Harrison
Program	Mary Laura Lamont
Editor	Thomas Allen Stock
	Betty Lotowycz
	Skip Blanchard
	Steven Clemants
	Eric Lamont

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### Membership

Membership is open to all, and we welcome new members. Annual dues are \$10. For membership, make your check payable to LONG ISLAND BOTANICAL SOCIETY and mail to: Lois Lindberg, Membership Chairperson, 45 Sandy Hill Road, Oyster Bay, NY 11771-3111

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## PROGRAMS

**11 March 1997, 7:30 pm\* Vincent Simeone,**  
(Assistant Director, Planting Fields Arboretum),  
**"Great Trees of Long Island"**

A talk updating the Great Tree Census, with a focus on local trees. Copies of the book "Great Trees of Long Island" will be available. Location: Bill Paterson Nature Center, Muttontown Preserve, East Norwich.

**8 April 1997 - 7:30 pm\* Dr. John Potente,**  
(American Chestnut Foundation Board Member & District #1 Director),

### "The Blight and Plight of the American Chestnut - Part II"

A brief review of Part I, followed by recent advances in plant biology (including genetic engineering) that may help in its struggle against the blight. Location: Uplands Farm Nature Center, Cold Spring Harbor. A joint program with The Nature Conservancy.

\*Refreshments & informal talk begin at 7:30pm, the meeting starts at 8pm. For directions to: 1) Muttontown Preserve please call 516-571-8500; 2) Uplands Farm, please call 516/367-3225.

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## LONG ISLAND BOTANICAL SOCIETY

c/o Muttontown Preserve  
Muttontown Lane  
East Norwich, New York 11732

